Parentkind

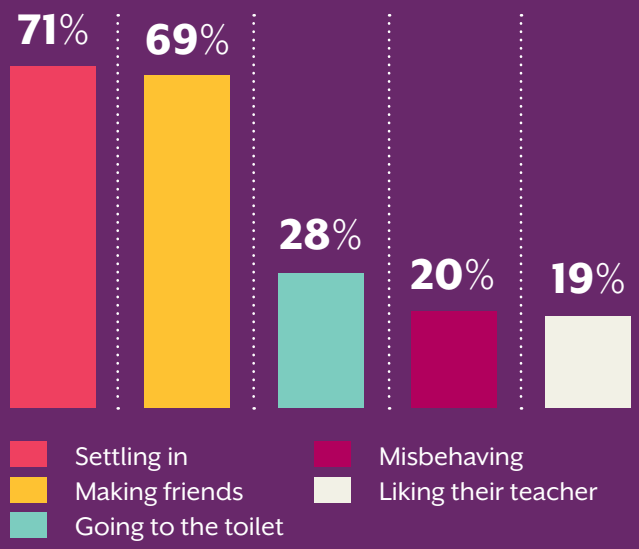
Be School Ready

What parents need to get ready, set, school!

Starting primary school is a huge step for your child (and you). Your little one is leaving nursery/pre-school and other primary carers behind and there are lessons, classrooms and lots of new people to get used to.

Research by Disney Junior highlights the top concerns for those in a parenting role who are sending their four-or-five–year-olds off to primary school for the first time. A survey of 1,000 parents revealed that 69% feel anxious about their child starting school in September. If this sounds like you, stick with us - you're in the right place!

Parents' top concerns when their child starts school:



These concerns cover some of the emotional, social, physical and material challenges all pre-school families face before term starts. It's completely natural to worry a little, but it needn't be scary. The good news is that there are plenty of ways you can prepare yourself and your child for the next phase of their education. Here's Parentkind's top tips and practical advice to make this transition as smooth as possible for the whole family.

Emotional preparation – *enjoy the experience*

Prepare YOURSELF first

Your pre-schooler will pick up on any anxieties you have, so your first task is to ensure that you are feeling positive. Here's how you can bust all of your worries and enjoy looking forward to your child's big day.

Knowledge is power

Find out as much as you can from the school about what the first day will be like, so you can familiarise yourself and your little one in advance. Gather useful snippets of information to start building a picture. Look at photos of the school, staff and children in the uniform online to help imagine being part of the environment.

It's good to talk

If you have friends or family who have been through the 'first day of school' adventure, try to sit down with them for a cup of tea and a chat. Ask them to tell you about their experience and share any good advice. It might be good for you to talk about your worries – they do say 'a problem shared is a problem halved!'

Get them used to school

Your child's school will arrange taster sessions, welcome meetings and tours before they start, but don't stop there. Go along to school summer fairs and as you walk around, talk about what goes on in the playground and classrooms (these events are great for picking up cheap second-hand toys and books too). If you have older children already at school, take little ones along to their open days and school performances. If you know the name of your child's teacher talk about them with your child, so that they begin to feel familiar.

Read books about children starting school at bedtime or play games. Fun, school related activities will help prepare them and will get them looking forward to a new adventure.

BBC's My First Day at School

This is a great game to introduce pre-schoolers to the classroom environment. Parents and carers can help their child create a character, pick a school jumper, then explore the school and find all the different activities to play.

Two-way communication

You can find most information on the school's website, or give them a call. If there's something you're concerned about, arrange to visit the school and ask to speak to your child's teacher or a member of the pastoral care team about your worries.

Talking to a friendly and helpful member of staff will do wonders for easing your mind. Also, you will know at least one person on the first day!

Find out:

What to do if your child is unwell
Who's who
The curriculum
Daily routines
Class pages
School dinners
Clubs
PTA updates
Who might be in your child's class

Equally, give the school as much info as you can about your child such as any big worries they have or anything that they particularly need help with.

Most schools will ask you for all this information and will have it in reports from their pre-school setting, but it never hurts to mention things that might help.

Top tip!

Even if your child doesn't have any allergies, it is good to find out whether the new school is 'nut free'.

Big up big school

If your child hears positive things from you about school, they themselves will be more positive.

Talk about school in a positive way, showing enthusiasm for the learning and experiences your child will encounter in the first year of school. How you and your family talk about school with (or in earshot of) your child will have the biggest influence

on how they feel about going. So even if your own memories of school aren't particularly happy ones, make sure you talk positively to your child about what school will be like for them.

Practise good social skills with your child, for example, smiling, making eye contact, sharing, and being helpful and kind. Encourage them to practise these skills with you, other family members and friends. Teach your child the importance of never being afraid to ask for help or to let an adult know if something bad has happened.

Expert tip!

If they see you talking to other parents and making friends, then they will think that it's the right thing to do. So, be brave yourself and get ready to make some new friends!

Sarah Ebner, author of The Starting School Survival Guide

Get involved

Research shows that children of all ages do better at school when parents are involved and engaged in their education. Experts say: "The effect of parental engagement over a student's school career is the equivalent of adding an extra two to three years to a student's education.

Teachers tell us the top six benefits are:

1. Builds trust and improves relationships between parents and teachers
2. Improves academic achievement
3. Improves behaviour
4. Develops a shared school ethos and culture
5. Reduces absenteeism
6. Raises aspirations

Supporting your child's learning is a great way to show them you value their education and will make you feel more involved in their studies and development.

Remember, they will always need you!

Even though your child may be becoming more independent, you still have a key part to play in your child's school life.

Prepare little brains for learning

There are some simple things you can do at home to help your child get ready for the learning they will experience at school.

Read

Research tells us that reading with your child every day is the most important way you can support your child's early learning. So make time for bedtime stories and visit your local library so your child can choose books according to their own interests. Look out for story books or non-fiction books that bring the school day to life. Your local library should have some you can borrow.

Talk

Encourage your child to take an interest in the world around them and to want to do things for themselves. Talk and interact with them as much as possible, as this will extend their vocabulary and understanding of the world.

Learn

Help your child to become familiar with the letters of the alphabet and numbers up to 10 or 20. You can encourage your child to look at notices in public places, use an alphabet book, count objects, sing number rhymes or play with toy letters and numbers.

Share

Help your child become accustomed to sharing and taking turns, by taking part in activities with family members and friends.

Stop

Gradually develop your child's focus and concentration by sitting together doing a jigsaw, colouring or looking at books.

Recognise

It's helpful if your child can recognise their name written down, so they can find their peg or tray and look after their possessions. Teachers often put a picture or photo by each child's name to make it easier for them.

Teacher's tip!

If your child is keen to try reading and writing, talk to the school about how they will teach – they will have their own ways. You don't want your child to have to unlearn what you taught them in favour of phonics or cursive writing.

Let go

Primary school teachers have experienced the whole spectrum of school starters, from those who can't yet count to one, to mini Mozarts. They are trained to bring everyone up to speed. You will still be a huge part of your child's education and you can always talk to their teacher to understand how best you can support their learning outside of school too.

Social preparation – *get ready to mingle!*

Making new friends can be scary - for children and parents! It's time to be brave and remember that everyone's in the same boat.

Get to know the parents

Attend any school inductions or settling-in sessions. These aren't just for the children to get to know each other, they're an opportunity for you to meet other parents in your area. Ask if there's a parent social media group or email network you can sign up to. Say hello to the other parents at the school gate – you'll probably end up leaning on each other a lot over the coming years (you can remind each other when non-school uniform day is).

Making new friends

Encourage your child to think about the new friends they could make, even if they are joining school with friends from nursery or pre-school. If you can find out who else will be in their class, invite one of those children over to play with your child during the summer holidays. That way, once school starts, your child already has a friend from the start of term. This will put them at ease when they go into class on that first day. If you're not sure which child to invite, choose one whose parents you have met and get on well with. If your children become best friends you will be seeing a lot more of them!

Top tip!

Joining the PTA is a sure-fire way of making new friends and becoming part of the school community.

Who's who and what do they do?

Who does what varies from school to school, depending on the needs of the school community, staff skills, and of course, funding.

Senior Leadership Team (SLT) – responsible to the Governing Body for the leadership and management of the school. The team includes the Head teacher or Principal, Deputy Head or Vice Principal and other key teaching staff.

Pastoral care – supports the social and emotional health and wellbeing of children at school. Hopefully your child's school blends pastoral care throughout their teaching, they may also have a dedicated pastoral care team either led by a teacher (often with responsibility for inclusion), or as a specialist role.

Family support – extends pastoral care to those in a parenting role. Parent support advisers, family liaison officers or education welfare officers can help you with any issues you may have supporting your children at home and in school.

SENCO / ALNCO – the Special Educational Needs Coordinator or Additional Learning Needs Coordinator. SENCOs/ALNCOs work in partnership with the families of children with special educational/additional learning needs to make sure they get the support they need at school and that any plans or provision agreed are carried out.

Learn the lingo

School life has a language and vocabulary all of its own. Here's a cheat sheet to get you started.

ARE: Age related expectations.

NQT: A newly qualified teacher in their first year of teaching.

G&T: Nope, not that! It's an abbreviation for gifted and talented. It's used to describe children who have the ability to develop significantly beyond what's expected for their age.

PSHE: Personal, social and health education.

SEN / SEND / ALN: Special Educational Needs / Special Educational Needs and Disability / Additional Learning Needs

Physical preparation *– practical activities*

Equip your children with some practical skills that will help them feel happy and confident about starting primary school:

- If your child will be having a hot lunch, show them a menu from the school website to give them an idea of what to expect and teach them to use cutlery. If they're having packed lunch, make sure they can open packets and unwrap their food without help – go for picnics to practise!
- If your child used your phone or tablet at home, teach them to use a computer mouse – their classroom might have one.
- Make sure your child is happy going to the toilet and pulling their clothes up or down independently. Remind them to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water after they have been to the toilet and before meals.
- Encourage your child to get themselves dressed and try to put their shoes on independently. Show your child how to put on and take off a jacket or coat, including fastening the zip. Ask your child to try putting on their school uniform and then changing into their PE kit. You'll soon find out which bits they need to practise. Choose elastic waists and comfortable and easy-to-fasten shoes for school – bring on the velcro!

Top tip!

Put a half smiley face in each of their shoes so they know which one goes on which foot.

Practise the school run

Take a walk or drive past the school so that the building and play areas become familiar and to check the timings and get your child used to the route. It's worth taking the school run route with your child a few times, and pointing out where the entrance is and things you will see on the journey. Children like the expected because it makes them feel safe.

New routines

If you're juggling family life, your job and a new school routine, you're not alone. Ask the school about breakfast and after-school clubs. Let your employer know well in advance that you've got primary school on the horizon. You may need to take time off to drop off and pick up around settling-in sessions. Your child's school may have a settling in process to help children become accustomed to the school day. This may include shorter days for a period of time or a staggered start.

Top tip!

If you are worried about how your child will adjust to starting school, contact the school to find out what support is available for your family.

Morning routine

1. Get up half an hour earlier than your child to give yourself a head start (and get dressed in peace).
2. Open curtains or switch on a lamp in your child's room 10 minutes before they need to get up, to give them a chance to wake up naturally.
3. Use the Parentkind morning checklist with your child so they learn what they need to do each day – as they get older encourage them to do more by themselves.
4. Allow enough time for breakfast. Leave 15-20 minutes to sit at the table, it'll give you a few minutes to talk about the day ahead, and eating a filling breakfast will help your child concentrate at school.
5. Switch off distractions like TV or tablets. Perhaps build in a few minutes to watch a bit of telly if everyone's ready on time, but not if it will cause problems leaving the house!

After school and evening routine

1. Check your child's book bag for any letters or notes from their teacher, the school office, or PTA. Party invites are often sent out this way too.
2. Find out if there's anything special going on the next day that they need something out of the ordinary for e.g. wellies, cardboard boxes, a costume for world book day!
3. Talk about their day, read together and (in time) help with homework tasks.
4. Make sure any books that come home are back in their bag each evening.
5. Help your child lay out their uniform ready for the morning (including BOTH shoes).
6. Get them to bed on time, because tired and grumpy children aren't fun in the morning! It might take a while to establish a routine, but stick with it and on the days that it all goes to plan, you'll find mornings are much calmer.

Material preparations *– shopping!*

Shop for the essentials

The school will give you a list of everything your child needs, but it might not all be essential right from the start, so ask other parents what can wait until later. Children come home covered in everything – mud, lunch, paint, playdough – you name it. So if you don't want to be washing clothes every night, you'll want to give the amount of uniform you'll need some thought.

Top tip!

Ask whether the PTA runs pre-loved uniform sales – particularly for school logo items. They're a great way to support the school and save money.

Help get your child excited about school by letting them help choose anything that isn't school specific, like shorts, wellies or their PE bag.

Have a special trip out to buy uniform and other things your child will need, such as a water bottle, shoes or a school bag. Shopping for new stationery is fun at any age!

Label everything. Iron-on or sew-in name tapes are best, but if you choose to write on labels with a biro or marker, remember that this fades as the garment is washed.

Shopping list

1. Name labels or wash proof markers
2. Jumpers, cardigans or sweatshirts
3. Shirts or polo shirts
4. Trousers, shorts, skirts or pinafores
5. Socks and tights
6. Coat
7. Summer hat
8. Tie (for some schools only)
9. Blazer (for some schools only)
10. Fleece (for some schools only)
11. Comfortable school shoes (slip-proof options may help avoid accidents in the playground and velcro may be quicker and easier than laces for your child to use)
12. Hat, scarf and gloves
13. Waterproofs; shoes and outer layer
14. PE kit with plimsolls, socks and a gym bag to keep it in
15. Swimming kit if your child's school gives swimming lessons
16. Rucksack
17. Lunch box and drinks bottle
18. Book bag

Lastly – enjoy it!

You can help your child look forward to school by removing the fear of the unknown. If they already go to nursery or preschool the move up to 'big school' should be a bit easier, but these simple steps will help your child to feel more confident. Good luck!

Top tip!

More questions? Join your school's PTA and access the hive mind.

There are so many great reasons to actively support your PTA at school including to socialise and get to know other parents and staff. The PTA is a brilliant way to keep in touch and build supportive links. Schools always need extra funds and the PTA committee decides how to spend any that are raised, which might be school discos, educational materials or playground equipment. Events remain a popular way to fundraise and bring the community together, but you'll find cake sales and Easter egg hunts may have been replaced by bake-offs, football tournaments and selfie competitions!

For more hints and tips on supporting your child's education, take a look at our:

Parents' Hub: a useful resource for all parents with children at school, containing practical advice, information and ideas from parents, teachers and other experts.

Parent eBulletin: get regular updates straight to your inbox with news, features and exciting events for parents. Sign up to the Parent eBulletin

Social Media: Follow Parentkind on Facebook and join our parent community in the Parent Hangout

If you've got a tip to share with other parents, please drop us a line at info@parentkind.org.uk